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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [LI](#)
SUBJECT: LIBERIA: TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION OPENS
FIRST HEARINGS

REF: A. 07 MONROVIA 864
[1](#)B. 07 MONROVIA 462
[1](#)C. 06 MONROVIA 1637
[1](#)D. 06 MONROVIA 1439

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The GOL Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) opened public hearings January 8 for the first time in its history. This round of hearings will continue through July 31 and carries the theme "Confronting our Difficult Past for a Better Future." President Sirleaf called on all Liberians to participate in the TRC process and apologized for the government's role in the country's 14-year civil conflict. While the TRC process has been slow in the past, the start of the public hearings marks a new chapter in its progress and has sparked greater public interest. END SUMMARY.

OPENING CEREMONY FOR TRC'S PUBLIC HEARINGS

[1](#)2. (U) The Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) held a ceremony to mark its first day of public hearings on January 8. This marked the beginning of the all important public hearing phase of the TRC's work. Since the TRC was formally launched in mid-2006 up until now, it has focused on extensive statement taking in Liberia and among the Liberian Diaspora. The hearings carry the theme "Confronting our Difficult Past for a Better Future" and will continue through January in Monrovia. After that it will travel throughout all 15 counties of Liberia until July 31.

[1](#)3. (U) In her speech at the ceremony, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf called upon all Liberian citizens to participate in the TRC process and apologized for the role the Liberian Government played in the fourteen years of civil war. TRC Chairman Jerome Verdier encouraged Liberian citizens to see the process as key to "a national renaissance." The most compelling testimony was that of the TRC's first witness, David D. Sayweh, which was given during the ceremony and in front of President Sirleaf. Sayweh tearfully testified that he was just 10 years old in 1994 when 25 rebels invaded his village and gang raped and killed his 16-year old sister. He alleged that "Sundaygar Dearboy," a famous rap artist, was the leader of the gang. The TRC said it will give Sundaygar Dearboy the opportunity to vindicate himself from the claim made by Sayweh.

SHOULD THE HEARINGS REALLY BE PUBLIC?

[1](#)4. (SBU) These public hearings raise security questions for both the witnesses and the accused. Local press called Sayweh "fearless" for having the courage to stand up publicly against a celebrity and possibly face retribution from the rapper's supporters. Likewise, those accused may also face extra-judicial retribution from the public. UNMIL helped the

GOL coordinate a TRC Security Protection Plan with the Liberian National Police (LNP) and UNPOL but, as the hearings just started, it has not been fully utilized.

HEARINGS MARK A NEW CHAPTER IN TRC PROCESS

15. (SBU) The TRC process has, up to this point, progressed slower than expected. Poor management, staff shortages, and infighting between Commissioners hindered its effectiveness. The pace has quickened, however, throughout 2007 and has improved further still since USAID's audit of the institution's finances last October. In total, approximately 14,000 statements have been taken throughout Liberia and the Diaspora. The Commission selects which statements merit a hearing and will use the hearings to decide if it will recommend anyone for prosecution or to receive restitution in its final report. The start of the public hearings therefore marks a new chapter in the TRC process. The hearings have been well-publicized and the public has taken an interest in the process. Many citizens eagerly await the Commission's final report, due at the end of 2008.

U.S. MAKES ADDITIONAL \$500,000 GRANT TO TRC

16. (U) In a January 10 signing ceremony, Ambassador Booth announced a U.S. grant of \$500,000 to support the ongoing work of the TRC, including continued statement taking, national awareness, increasing the involvement of civil society in supporting the TRC's work, and to help finance the final report of the Commission. Ambassador Booth said that the grant was one component of U.S. assistance to rule of law and democracy, adding "at the core of the TRC process is the

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restoration of human dignity." This latest grant is on top of \$400,000 the USG has previously provided the TRC.

17. (SBU) COMMENT. Until the start of these public hearings, the TRC itself was not sure what it was going to do with the 14,000 statements it collected (and continues to collect). Only a small fraction of those who gave statements will ever be called into a hearing, but the very fact that some people are testifying gives the institution credibility in the eyes of the public. While the Commission has been plagued by poor management and inefficiency, it appears to have improved its operations since its October 2007 USAID audit. The opening of these public hearings shows that they are making progress.

18. (SBU) Whether the TRC can be the vehicle for a veritable healing process, however, remains to be seen. That depends directly on how well security is maintained for the witnesses and alleged violators. It also depends on how well the public receives the Commission's final report. The TRC can recommend people for prosecution and recommend that others receive restitution payments but frankly has no resources to do either. Nevertheless, the fact that the hearings have made the public more interested in the process overall is a success in its own right. END COMMENT.
Booth